

## **Spiritual Friendship**

By Ewen Arnold

I've had quite a lot of time on my hands recently, and this is one of the things I've been thinking about!

I want to start with some stories. The first is probably the most famous story about spiritual friendship.

“At one time the Buddha was living among the Sakyans. Ananda approached him and said, ‘This is half of the holy life, Lord: admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie.’ The Buddha replied, ‘Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life.’” (Adapted from Access to Insight, Upaddha Sutta)

Here's a story Ajahn Brahm tells about his teacher, Ajahn Chah. Ajahn Brahm was seriously ill in hospital in Northern Thailand, I think it was with Cholera, but I'm not sure. He became excited when he heard that his teacher, the famous Ajahn Chah, was coming to see him. Ajahn Chah came and stood at the end of the bed. He said, “Either you will get better or you'll die.” And then he left.

And here's a story about my own teacher, Upul. On the day my wife died I was in the funeral home where her body was lying. Upul came and sat next to me. “This is a great spiritual opportunity,” he said, and he left.

Finally, a story about Padma, my wife and spiritual teacher! Padma was a qualified cook and really enjoyed experimenting in the kitchen. One day, when she had been cooking for a while, and I was in the lounge, I heard a terrific crashing sound from the kitchen. I rushed in, and there she was, holding an empty tray and covered in food. It was all over her blouse and skirt and on her feet, and there were broken pieces of crockery all around. And she was laughing uproariously!

### **The job of a spiritual friend**

The job of a spiritual friend is to tell us the truth about the world. I don't usually like to use the word truth. It's very much abused as a term, like the terms democracy and freedom. But the Buddha pointed to some pretty universal truths. If you are born, you die. There is suffering. In the story about Ajahn Brahm and Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Chah tells the truth. It wasn't what Ajahn Brahm wanted to hear, but the point is that, in coming to understand these truths, not just intellectually but in our bones, we become free from suffering. And the best time to really get these truths is when we are gripped by suffering.

Telling the truth of the situation may involve challenging our expected social norms. It will probably involve challenging our taken-for-granted assumptions about the world, and about how we should relate to what happens to us. What a lot of other people said to me in the funeral parlour was either to comfort me, to give me advice, or to point out the unfairness of what happens. “This is a tragedy.” “It shouldn't have happened.” “Time is a great healer.” Of course, there may be times when giving comfort is exactly what is required, but often the purpose of such things is so that we can get on with our lives as they were before the tragedy happened. But our lives before the so-called tragedy were full of suffering, and what Upul said was completely true, and pointed to a way out of the suffering. Our minds and our societies like to divide the world into good and bad, likes and dislikes, an either/or world. But actually our world is more a both/and world. We are taught that funerals are sad affairs and that weddings are happy affairs. But children run around and play at funerals, and some of the tears cried by brides on the wedding day are not tears of joy. So a funeral or a serious illness can be both sad and happy, horrible and liberating,

at the same time.

We take things like illness, death, so seriously and so personally, but we are not alone. We are in this together. The fact that there are such things as spiritual friends, the fact that there is such a thing as sangha, shows this. We are deeply connected and interconnected. One interesting and important aspect of this is that when we feel upset, worried, frustrated, or even lovely we can connect with all the others in the world who are feeling like this at this moment, and not feel so alone. So we can connect through our suffering. We can also connect through our joy. And we can also connect and not take things so seriously through our sense of humour, through the insight that, whatever happens, we have a choice as to how we react, just as Padma did when covered with food! Spiritual friends give us the possibility to see the bigger picture rather than our own narrow me-centered picture. They can offer a different perspective, sometimes this may involve seeing the funny side, something which Godwin was really good at!

We all carry around with us beliefs about ourselves, others, and the world. Part of the job of a spiritual friend is to challenge these beliefs. One particularly limiting set of beliefs is the set of beliefs about shoulds and shouldn'ts, should haves and shouldn't haves. Here are a few that a spiritual friend might want to challenge.

Illness shouldn't happen.

Coronavirus really shouldn't happen. It's a kind of curse.

Children shouldn't die before their parents.

Bad things always happen to me.

It isn't the events themselves that cause the suffering. It's the way we react to them. A spiritual friend might be able to point this out.

### **Some final thoughts**

Spiritual friends act as a model for what is possible as a human being. The two friends I knew best, Padma and Godwin, both modeled openness, approachability and acceptance, forgiveness, generosity and love, as well as being uncompromising on the truth of the situation. And, at the same time, they were completely themselves in a way that is hard to describe.

How does a spiritual friend know what is appropriate to say or do in a given circumstance? I don't know. What I do know is that the more you pay attention to your friends, the more closely you listen without getting in the way of the listening, the more likely it is that your response will be appropriate, and, of course, saying nothing may at times be the most appropriate thing.

I think it's likely that everybody meets people who would be helpful to them on their spiritual journey, to reduce their suffering, all the time, but they don't recognize them as such.

The Buddha's reply to Ananda: "Don't say that, Ananda." This in itself challenges Ananda. It's not the answer he expected. He probably expected the answer, "Yes."

Finally, we can be our own spiritual friend. We can stand back from what's happening and ask ourselves, "What would the Buddha, Ajahn Chah, Padma, or Godwin say or do in this situation? How would they respond?"